

Exercise Evaluation Report

Exercise Bar Crossing – Coastal Otago Marine SAREx

Location: Catlins/ Tautuku River Bar, South Otago Coastline, New Zealand

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Figure 1 Initial message to Marine Responders 0939 hours.

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Executive Summary

The Marine SAREX conducted on 27 April 2025 successfully tested inter-agency communication, coordination, and operational response at the Tautuku River Bar. The exercise aimed to implement the Clutha Catlins Marine Response Plan, establish an Incident Management Team (IMT), and provide mentoring opportunities. All participating agencies demonstrated effective collaboration, though some areas for improvement were identified, particularly around communication tools and documentation processes.

A multi-agency Marine Search and Rescue Exercise was conducted to test operational readiness and inter-agency coordination in response to a simulated vessel incident at the Tautuku River bar. Agencies involved included NZ Police, LandSAR, Surf Lifesaving, and regional emergency partners.

The exercise focused on implementing the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan in a dynamic, real-time environment. Key activities included deployment of subjects into water and shoreline environments, the establishment of a Forward Command, the transition to an Incident Management Team (IMT) under CIMS principles, and multi-agency search and rescue operations.

Overall, the exercise demonstrated strong inter-agency collaboration, effective communication, and operational competence in managing a complex marine incident. Safety briefings were well delivered, and agencies worked cohesively to achieve operational objectives. The majority of key performance indicators (KPIs) were met or partially met, with areas for improvement identified around formalising IMT handovers, strengthening future operational period planning, and enhancing structured learning capture during debriefs.

The exercise achieved its aim of validating existing response plans, strengthening operational relationships between agencies, and highlighting opportunities for continuous improvement in Marine Search and Rescue readiness across the region.

1. Recommendations

1. Formalise the IMT Handover Process

Develop a simple, standardised handover checklist and verbal briefing protocol to ensure smooth transition of incident control from Forward Command to the IMT. This will help maintain continuity of situational awareness and resource tracking.

2. Improve Future Operational Period Planning

Assign responsibility within the Planning Function early for considering and documenting plans for future operational periods, even during shorter incidents. This practice will build capability for managing longer or more complex responses.

3. Continue and Expand Mentor Engagement

Maintain and strengthen the use of mentors during exercises, with an emphasis on live coaching and scenario-driven learning. Consider formal mentor observations or "learning moments" that can be shared during the debrief to reinforce good practices and learning opportunities.

4. Strengthen Learning Capture in Debriefs

Implement more structured debriefing processes, such as using quick written feedback or facilitated group reflections, to better capture participant experiences, lessons identified and areas for improvement.

Commendations:

These commendations are out of scope for this report but need to be acknowledged.

Effective Safety Briefings

Safety briefings were consistently delivered to those at Forward Command prior to deployment. Responders demonstrated a good understanding of operational risks and safety expectations, reflecting strong adherence to pre-plan procedures. This is a notable strength and should be maintained in future operations.

Strong Multi-Agency Collaboration

Agencies worked together effectively, with clear communication and joint tasking evident throughout the operation. The positive inter-agency relationships greatly contributed to operational success and resilience during the scenario.

2. Introduction

This multi-agency exercise focused on a simulated marine incident response, coordinated by Police, involving LandSAR, Surf Lifesaving, Fire and Emergency, and other regional emergency partners. The scenario involved a distressed vessel at the Tautuku River bar, requiring the rescue of multiple missing persons from both the water and the shoreline.

The exercise was designed to test operational readiness, inter-agency communication, and procedural alignment with the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan. It challenged participating agencies to work collaboratively under realistic and dynamic conditions, reinforcing their ability to respond effectively to a complex marine emergency.

Planning and delivery of the exercise were conducted through a joint, multi-agency approach, ensuring the scenario was relevant, achievable, and meaningful for all participants. Live deployments of subjects, active marine and shoreline search operations, and the establishment of an Incident Management Team (IMT) provided opportunities to practice both immediate response functions and the transition to structured incident management under the Coordinated Incident Management System (CIMS).

Overall, the exercise served to strengthen operational partnerships, validate key response plans, and identify opportunities for continuous improvement in multi-agency marine incident response across the region.

3. Background

3.1 Background to the Exercise

Each year the New Zealand Search and Rescue Council (NZSAR) provides funding for each of the 10 Police Districts with SAR responsibility to enhance their capability to plan, monitor, evaluate and debrief these activities.

With each Police District undertaking annual exercises, frequent SAROps across the country, and regular SAR agency training and drills, it is felt that tactical level operations are well practiced.

This exercise stemmed from an identified need to strengthen inter-agency marine search and rescue capabilities in the Clutha and Catlins coastal area. It supported existing projects focused on improving SAR coordination, radio communication, and multi-agency response planning.

3.2 Dates, location, organising agency(s), key people

Sunday 27th April 2025, Owaka LandSAR Base, Owaka Catlins, Otago Coastal Police SAR, Matthew Sheat.

3.3 Participating organisations

- NZ Police SAR
- Surf Lifesaving New Zealand
- Land Search and Rescue New Zealand
- Fire and Emergency New Zealand
- Local Marine Responders
- Hato Hone St John
- Amateur Radio Emergency Communications
- Local Community

3.4 Exercise aim

To practice the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan in an operational environment.

3.5 Exercise objectives

- Implement the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan.
- Establish an Incident Management Team and transition control from Forward Command.
- Provide mentoring and learning opportunities for participants.
- Test multi-agency collaboration and communication.

3.6 Exercise Scenario

A Mayday call is received from a recreational vessel attempting to cross the Tautuku River bar. The vessel, disabled in rough sea conditions, reports that three of its five occupants have been thrown overboard and are currently unaccounted for. Two occupants remain aboard the stricken vessel, requiring urgent assistance. Weather and tidal conditions are challenging, adding complexity to the rescue effort.

In response, a simulated search and rescue operation is launched. Search teams are deployed by land, sea, and air to locate the missing persons and assist those remaining on board. To replicate realistic conditions, subjects are positioned in the water and along the shoreline, simulating likely drift patterns, survival behaviours, and possible locations based on prevailing environmental factors.

The exercise tests the ability of responding agencies to coordinate a multi-faceted operation under CIMS (Coordinated Incident Management System) structures. It includes live tracking of subjects, systematic water and shoreline searches, casualty recovery, and medical triage. The scenario challenges teams to rapidly develop search plans, maintain effective communications, and manage scene safety while operating in a dynamic and high-risk environment.



Figure 2 Vessel in distress inside the Catlin's River/Tautuku Bar.

4. Evaluation Methodology

4.1 The agreed outcomes of the evaluation activity

It was agreed that a written report be produced measuring the IMT against the objectives, sub-objectives and related KPI's. This will include any recommendations relating to the objectives.

4.2 Evaluation scope

The evaluation scope was primarily focused on the Clutha Catlins Incident Management Team (IMT) and their implementation of the Clutha Catlins Marine Response Plan. This included evaluating:

- Command and control setup
- Communication flows between agencies
- Resource deployment and coordination
- Mentorship activities
- Hot debrief outcomes

To measure how well the exercise met the stated purpose through the evaluation objectives and supporting KPIs.

4.3 Aspects of the exercise observed, what was not observed

The data collection methodology evolved around three key methods: Observation, interview and document analysis.

Observation method took an overt and direct approach to understand the process, systems and situation awareness as it developed in the Incident Management Team (IMT). Aspects observed in the IMT included the IMT structure, CIMS knowledge, briefings, systems and processes, operations and outputs.

An exercise evaluation form was utilised with a checklist that could be ticked off as objectives, and KPIs were observed as either met, partially met, or not met. This allowed for less disruption on the participants during the exercise.

There were limitations in this approach as the lead evaluator being unable to observe all aspects of the exercise. A second evaluator provided support on gathering evidence and observations and reported back to the lead evaluator.

When aspects from the observation method were missed, an informal interview approach was adopted to ensure that information was captured. This approach was implemented as a last resort.

Additionally, a document analysis of action plans, situation reports, spreadsheets, and tasks completed was available after the exercise and provided a comprehensive insight into the outputs of the exercise. This allowed for any outstanding objectives and KPIs to be assessed.

The purpose of this evaluation was to evaluate process in line with the objectives, not individuals.

4.4 The process followed in preparing and submitting the report

Professional conduct and protocols were agreed upon with the exercise planners and NZSAR prior to the exercise commencing.

- The NZSAR Exercise Evaluation Form provided the foundation for data collection and assessment.
- The [Code of Conduct for Evaluation in the United Nations System](#), and the United Nations [UNDP Evaluation Guidelines](#) to ensure ethical and professional standards were adhered to.

The initial exercise evaluation form was completed. Aspects of the form were highlighted to show any areas that were missed or needed clarification. This was sent to exercise evaluation team and NZSAR Contractor.

Once feedback was received ratings and comments were amended and sent back for final approval. This was then incorporated into the report.

4.5 Other information

The exercise was based on the initial start-up and the first operational period of an IMT during a Marine SAR Operation. This exercise lasted 6 hours approx. An Evaluator was present at Forward Command located near the Tautuku Bar for the initial 4 hours and back at IMT in Owaka for the remaining 3 hours.

5. Findings

The exercise successfully demonstrated several strengths in Otago Coastal Search and Rescue's marine response capabilities, while also identifying areas requiring further development.

Objective 1: Practice implementation of the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan - Met
The Forward Commander, On-Call Incident Controller, and LandSAR Response Manager established effective communication early in the operation, meeting the key performance indicator (KPI 1.1).

Local marine responders were deployed and briefed appropriately, with health and safety briefings conducted prior to deployment (KPI 1.2 and 1.3). These KPIs were fully met, reflecting strong procedural adherence. A full debrief to identify improvements to the existing pre-plan was initiated, although some documentation aspects remained to be completed. A post-operation "hot debrief" was conducted, identifying valuable improvements to the pre-plan, (KPI 1.4). These results align broadly with sector standards, where timely tasking and responder safety are critical first responses.



Figure 3 Marine Responders on the water post-briefing (1112 hours)

Objective 2: Establishment of an Incident Management Team (IMT) – Partially Met

An IMT was successfully assembled and structured under CIMS, but with varying levels of participant familiarity with CIMS processes (KPI 2.1).

While communication between Forward Command and the IMT was timely (KPI 2.3), the handover of control was confused, drawn out and incomplete, leading to information gaps and resource management challenges (KPI 2.4).

Mentoring was provided primarily to the Incident Controller, but there was limited mentorship for other IMT roles due to space constraints which is why KPI 2.2 is partially met.

Deployment and management of resources by the IMT revealed challenges in maintaining situational oversight which led to KPI 2.5 being partially met.

Initial Action Plan was still incomplete at 1315 and planning for future operational periods was limited. While SOPs typically cover the initial action for an immediate response, at no time was the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan witnessed or referred to in the IMT. In lieu of SOPs being followed, Response Guidelines and CIMS processes need to be followed. However, a Demobilisation Plan was completed with appropriate and realistic timeframes (KPI 2.1).

While this objective was met, the drawn-out nature and confusion that occurred highlights the need for more structured handovers and improved planning discipline.

These outcomes are consistent with national SAR sector realities for exercises involving live handovers and complex scenarios, where practice in maintaining continuity across operational periods is important, but there is opportunity for improvements to be made.

Figure 4 IAP as at 1315 hours

The image shows two SAR Incident Action Plan (IAP) forms. The left form is dated 17-14-25 and the right form is dated 27-04-2025. Both forms are titled 'SAR INCIDENT ACTION PLAN (INITIAL)' and include sections for Operation name, Date, Time, Situation summary, Incident Control, Planning/Intelligence, Operations, Logistics, Factors, Priorities, Incident objectives, Strategies, and Resources needs. The right form has handwritten notes in the Situation summary and Goal sections.

Objective 3: Mentoring and learning opportunities – Partially Met

Mentoring was provided to the Incident Controller, and guidance was effective (KPI 3.1 and 3.2). However, broader mentorship across the IMT roles was limited by space constraints and was not fully considered in planning (KPI 3.1).

While a “hot debrief” was conducted with strong agency participation, structured feedback for individual learning improvements could be enhanced.

Participant involvement in debriefs was strong, but opportunities for feedback on learning gaps could be further formalised (KPI 3.3) This mirrors best practice in the SAR sector, where a culture of continual improvement is supported through structured feedback.



Figure 5 Visual representation of the difficulties encountered to meet Objective Three at (space limitations)

Objective 4: Multi-agency collaboration and communication - Met

Inter-agency communications were well-established according to the pre-plan procedures (KPI 4.1), and collaboration was evident during operational tasks (KPI 4.2), both met. All agencies participated actively in the debriefing process to identify lessons identified meeting KPI 4.3. These results strongly support the sector standard expectations for interoperability and collaborative SAR responses.



Figure 6 Multi-agency collaboration and communication taking place at Forward Command (0957 hours)

Summary

Overall, the exercise met the majority of key objectives, demonstrating a strong operational response to a complex, multi-casualty marine incident.

The exercise achieved its primary aim of validating the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan in a real-world context. Strengths included effective initial communication, strong marine responder preparation, and cohesive multi-agency collaboration.

Areas for improvement include formalising IMT handovers, enhancing planning for future operational periods, and expanding mentoring opportunities within the IMT environment.

The findings highlight a comprehensive foundation for marine incident response while providing a clear pathway for continuous improvement in incident management, training, and operational coordination across agencies.

6. Conclusions

The Marine Search and Rescue Exercise successfully demonstrated the region's strong capabilities in responding to a complex marine incident scenario. Through coordinated efforts by Police, LandSAR, Surf Lifesaving, and regional partners, the exercise validated key components of the Coastal Otago SAR Readiness Plan and reinforced effective operational relationships across agencies.

The majority of exercise objectives and key performance indicators were met, particularly in the areas of initial communication, marine responder tasking, safety management, and multi-agency collaboration. These outcomes reflect a high level of operational readiness and commitment to coordinated response practices.

However, the exercise also identified important areas for development. In particular, improvements are required in formalising the transition of Forward Command to an Incident Management Team (IMT), planning for future operational periods, and providing broader mentorship and learning support for all IMT participants. Addressing these areas will enhance operational resilience and ensure a more seamless and scalable response capability in future incidents.

Overall, the exercise was a valuable opportunity to test, learn, and improve. It confirmed that Coastal Otago's SAR organisations are well-positioned to respond to marine emergencies, while also providing clear, evidence-based pathways for strengthening processes, leadership development, and operational planning. Continued collaboration, training, and refinement of key systems will ensure that readiness and capability continue to evolve to meet future challenges.

7. Appendix



Figure 7 Vessel in distress inside the bar.



Figure 8 LandSAR team briefing

Figure 9 Hot Debrief

Appendix 1: Otago Coastal Search and Rescue SAREx Evaluation Key Performance Indicators

This appendix lists the objectives and key performance indicators being used for evaluation of the exercise.

Met: The evaluation criteria was met in all instances – **Partially Met:** The evaluation criteria was met in some instances, but were incomplete tasks associated with these evaluation criteria – **Not Met:** The evaluation criteria was not met in any instance

Objective 1: Practice implementation of the Clutha Catlins Marine Response Plan in an operational environment.		
Key Performance Indicators	1 Met 2 Partially Met 3 Not Met	Evaluators Comments
1.1 Forward Commander, On-call Incident Controller and LandSAR Response Manager establish effective communications with each other.	1	Met Comms established by 1000 hours utilising police/FENZ radio comm, LandSAR radio comms and cell phones. Otago Coastal SAR Readiness Plan was available and utilised by LandSAR Response Manager. NZSAR Guidelines were utilised also. It was commented that the Plan would be easier to follow if it was in a checklist form.
1.2 Local Marine Responders are deployed, tasked, and briefed as per the Readiness Plan.	1	Met 1019 hours boats on water – SLSNZ vessels briefed on H&S including weather, tide, drift modelling, parameters of search, understanding of search plan, advance first aid personnel identified, wellness and team checks etc.
1.3 Safety briefing given to local marine responders by LandSAR Response Manager, Incident Controller or Police Forward Commander as appropriate.	1	Met Marine responders deployed with H&S and tasking sheet from Forward Command via IMT in Owaka. Hazard and Risk board was developed by LandSAR Response Manager team and displayed for all incoming personnel to see and updated as hazards identified

1.4 Debrief held to identify improvements to the existing pre plan	TBC at a later date	
Objective 2: Practice the establishment of an IMT to support the response and transition control of the incident from the Forward Command team to the IMT.		
Key Performance Indicators	1 Met 2 Partially Met 3 Not Met	Evaluators Comments
2.1 IMT team assembled and structured in accordance with CIMS principles.	1	CIMS structure included Incident Control, Safety, Operations, Planning, Intelligence and MSU (no logistic function in IMT). Range of CIMS function understanding in IMT. Some well versed in CIMS others with very limited knowledge of CIMS and processes. No CIMS editions or CIMS Function cards were present in the IMT, the Otago Coastal SAR Readiness Plan was not referred to at any stage, or were the NZSAR response guidelines. No IAP was completed, however Information Collections Plan, timeline, maps were utilised.
2.2 Mentors provide guidance to Incident Controller and other IMT members.	2	Mentoring taking place with Incident Controller, no mentoring for the rest of IMT. The room utilised caused limitations on how many people could be present in IMT.
2.3 Communication established with Forward Command Team	1	Comms established with Forward Command were timely and appropriate.
2.4 Handover completed and control of event transferred to IMT from Forward Command Team.	1	Handover began at 1212 hours. Although there was much confusion of the process

		between Forward Command, Owaka IMT and Dunedin Police. The transition was not smooth and as a result information was missed and there was a duplication of effort. Official control was handed over at 1322 hours.
2.5 IMT continues to deploy resources in a manner appropriate to the scenario and in accordance with good search management principles	2	Coastguard was stood down prior to their arrival with the argument that the logistics for refuelling would be too difficult. FENZ were stood down at 1219 hours but it was unclear if this was FENZ initiated or IMT initiated. SLSNZ stood themselves down at 1300 hours during confusion on who leading and where taskings were coming from. Confusion during handover on how many resources were on the water and how many casualties had been accounted for. IMT was unaware of exact number of personnel still deployed in the field at time of Exend.
2.6 Planning for future operational periods is commenced	2	No contingency or extended search planning was conducted, however a Demobilisation Plan was completed
Objective 3: Mentoring and learning opportunities are provided to participants.		
Key Performance Indicators	1 Met 2 Partially Met 3 Not Met	Evaluators Comments
3.1 Mentors assigned to IMT and other roles as required.	2	No mentors for IMT roles – there was no discussion on if this was considered. However, the room was too small to allow

		a full IMT let alone mentors to be present. Incident Controller did have mentorship by an experienced Senior SAR Police Squad member.
3.2 Mentors actively assist participants to effectively manage the response.	1	Mentor present actively assisted and provided advice and guidance to Incident Controller
3.3 Participants take part in debrief to identify lessons.	1	Hot debrief conducted involving all participants and organisations. Cold debrief to take place at a later date.
Objective 4: Practice multi agency collaboration and communication		
Key Performance Indicators	1 Met 2 Partially Met 3 Not Met	Evaluators Comments
4.1 Effective communication between agencies is established as per procedures in pre-plan	1	Met. Otago Coastal SAR Readiness Plan utilised. Feedback from participants was that it could be formatted better, a check list or tick box summary would be beneficial.
4.2 Agencies collaborate effectively.	1	Met Great collaboration at Forward Command with roles and responsibilities verbalised and understood. A unified command structure was utilised with Local Police and LandSAR Response Manager to ensure all bases were covered and the pre-plan implemented with appropriate authority.
4.3 Contribution from participating agencies in debriefing to identify lessons learned and improvements to pre-plan.	1	Met Hot debrief conducted involving all participants and organisations. Cold debrief to take place at a later date.